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## Questions and answers about arsenic

This public health statement tells you about arsenic and the effects of exposure.

### What is arsenic?

Arsenic is an element that is widely distributed in the earth's crust. Elemental arsenic is ordinarily a steel grey metal-like material that sometimes occurs naturally. However, arsenic is usually found in the environment combined with other elements such as oxygen, chlorine, and sulfur. Arsenic combined with these elements is called inorganic arsenic. Arsenic combined with carbon and hydrogen is referred to as organic arsenic.

### When am I exposed?

You are exposed to a substance only when you come in contact with it. You may be exposed by breathing, eating, or drinking the substance, or by skin contact.

If you are exposed to arsenic, many factors determine whether you'll be harmed. These factors include the dose (how much), the duration (how long), and how you come in contact with it. You must also consider the other chemicals you are exposed to and your age, sex, diet, family traits, lifestyle, and state of health.

### What happens to arsenic when it enters the environment?

Arsenic occurs naturally in soil and minerals and therefore it may enter the air, water, and land from wind-blown dust and may get into water from runoff and leaching. Volcanic eruptions are another source of arsenic. Arsenic is associated with ores mined for metals, such as copper and lead, and may enter the environment during the mining and smelting of these ores.

Small amounts of arsenic also may be released into the atmosphere from coal-fired power plants and incinerators because coal and waste products often contain some arsenic.

Arsenic cannot be destroyed in the environment. It can only change its form, or become attached or separated, from particles. It may change its form by reacting with oxygen or other molecules present in air, water, or soil, or by the action of bacteria that live in soil or sediment. Arsenic released from power plants and other combustion processes is usually attached to very small particles. Arsenic contained in wind-borne soil is generally found in larger particles.

#### **How might I be exposed to arsenic?**

Arsenic is found naturally in the environment. You may be exposed to arsenic by eating food, drinking water, or breathing air. Children may also be exposed to arsenic by eating dirt. You may also be exposed by skin contact with soil or water that contains arsenic.

The concentration of arsenic in soil varies widely, generally ranging from about

1 to 40 parts of arsenic to a million parts of soil (ppm) with an average level of 5 ppm. However soils in the vicinity of arsenic-rich geological deposits, some mining and smelting sites, or agricultural areas where arsenic pesticides had been applied in the past may contain much higher levels of arsenic.

The concentration of arsenic in natural surface and groundwater is generally about 1 part in a billion parts of water (1 ppb) but may exceed 1,000 ppb in mining areas or where arsenic levels in soil are high. Groundwater is far more likely to contain high levels of arsenic than surface water.

Surveys of U.S. drinking water indicate that about 80% of water supplies have less than 2 ppb of arsenic; but 2% of supplies exceed 20 ppb of arsenic. Levels of arsenic in food range from about 20 to 140 ppb.

#### **How can arsenic enter and leave my body?**

If you swallow arsenic in water, soil, or food, most of the arsenic may quickly enter into your body. The amount that enters your body will depend on how much you swallow and the

kind of arsenic that you swallow. This is the most likely way for you to be exposed near a waste site. If you breathe air that contains arsenic dusts, many of the dust particles settle onto the lining of the lungs. Most of the arsenic in these particles is then taken up from the lungs into the body. You might be exposed in this way near waste sites where arsenic-contaminated soils are allowed to blow into the air. If you get arsenic-contaminated soil or water on your skin, only a small amount will go through your skin into your body, so this is usually not of concern.

#### **How can arsenic affect my health?**

To protect the public from the harmful effects of toxic chemicals and to find ways to treat people who have been harmed, scientists use many tests. One way to see if a chemical will hurt people is to learn how the chemical is absorbed, used, and released by the body; for some chemicals, animal testing may be necessary. Animal testing may also be used to identify health effects such as can-

cer or birth defects. Without laboratory animals, scientists would lose a basic method to get information needed to make wise decisions to protect public health. Scientists have the responsibility to treat research animals with care and compassion. Laws today protect the welfare of research animals, and scientists must comply with strict animal care guidelines.

Perhaps the single most characteristic effect of long-term oral exposure to inorganic arsenic is a pattern of skin changes. These include a darkening of the skin and the appearance of small "corns" or "warts" on the palms, soles, and torso. A small number of the corns may ultimately develop into skin cancer. Swallowing

arsenic has also been reported to increase the risk of cancer in the liver, bladder, kidneys, prostate, and lungs. The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has determined that inorganic arsenic is a known carcinogen. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has determined that inorganic arsenic is carcinogenic to humans.

**Is there a medical test to determine whether I have been exposed to arsenic?**

Several sensitive and specific tests can measure arsenic in your blood, urine, hair, or fingernails, and these tests are often helpful in determining if

you have been exposed to above-average levels of arsenic. These tests are not usually performed in a doctor's office. They require sending the sample to a testing laboratory. Measurement of arsenic in your urine is the most reliable means of detecting arsenic exposures that you experienced within the last several days. Most tests measure the total amount of arsenic present in your urine. Sometimes this can be misleading, because the nonharmful forms of arsenic in fish and shellfish can give a high reading even if you have not been exposed to a toxic form of arsenic.